Opinion
Spirituality



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Our older daughter, who turned three this week, has a new favorite bedtime prayer tradition that my wife started with her. The kiddo calls it "Dear God," and she requests it by name most nights. "Dear God" is a recap of the day's events, highlighting moments we are thankful for. It starts with breakfast and covers all the people she saw and things she did. On her birthday, the very full list included a fish-shaped cake, a seahorse craft she made with some friends, and trips to the diner and aquarium. (She is a huge fan of marine life.)

"Dear God" is a recent development, but our daughter has been recapping her day through prayer for quite a while. She used to do this by seamlessly integrating notable events and objects into the prayer intentions list.

For about a week last summer, for instance, she prayed for her grandparents and cousins out loud and then added the fish she had fed at a friend's pond, plus the watermelon she fed them. It's equal parts prayer and mental processing time, and it seems to relax her. I know replaying a day in my own head is one way I combat occasional bouts with insomnia.

Practitioners of Ignatian spirituality might notice in "Dear God" a hint of the daily examen, an "examination of consciousness" prayer form that St. Ignatius of Loyola describes in his manual The Spiritual Exercises, which includes a meditative, gratitude-filled review of one's day.

Jesuit Father Dennis Hamm describes the examen as "Rummaging for God" within the context of the day just past. He writes that it is akin to "going through a drawer full of stuff, feeling around, looking for something that you are sure must be in there somewhere." Ignatius believed in the grace and power of the examen so strongly — it was a gift straight from God, he believed — it was one of the only spiritual rituals he required his brother Jesuits to practice everyday.

The "everyday" part seems to be important for the examen to work well. In my last job, I facilitated weeklong community service and social justice camp-style programs for Catholic teenagers. A tradition of the programs was to close each day with a "Dear God"-style modification of the examen we called "gifts and challenges," during which the students would share aloud a gift and a challenge they encountered that

day.

We asked a lot of the teenagers during those weeks, putting them into physically or emotionally challenging service situations for five or six hours a day, plus a few more hours of justice education and theological reflection. The best part of gifts and challenges was the way the kids would progress through the week, going deeper each time in their reflections about serving meals at a soup kitchen or playing board games with adults with developmental disabilities.

By Thursday or Friday, it wasn't uncommon at one of our service sites to hear a participant notice and mentally "bank" a moment of gift or challenge to share later that evening, having developed a habit of noticing God at work within their experiences.

And that's a big thing I hope for both of our daughters as they get older, that we help them grow in the practice of noticing God around them all the time. The examen will be a great gift in the midst of what will become busy, distraction-filled lives.

Ignatius didn't have the internet or babies, but I hear his voice talking directly to us through the centuries: "Look, I know you have a lot going on. I'm not saying drop all of it. But try this simple prayer of noticing and gratitude, do it everyday, and see what happens."

The richest spiritual times in my life have been periods when I've practiced the daily examen, and I don't think that's a coincidence. Sometimes, especially moments after both the girls have been crying loudly at the same time, I feel like I need to do better inviting God into the stressful parts of my life. The message of the examen, I think, is that God has been there all along and I've too often missed it. Maybe this new "Dear God" tradition will help all of us pay better attention.

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